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ABSTRACT

Birthparents are the least studied, understood and served members of the adoption triad. Birthparents are also often the invisible members of the adoption triad. For some this is by preference, and for others this is an artifact of a system that has traditionally required invisibility. This manuscript briefly reviews the limited and interdisciplinary literature on the lifelong experiences of birthparents. Much of the research attempts to predict relinquishment among adolescents considering adoption. Longer-term follow-up research is comprised mostly of retrospective studies of clinical populations. These findings, though not representative, indicate that birthparents feel a sense of loss up to thirty years following the relinquishment of their child. Counseling and research implications are discussed, including the importance of studying and providing services to international birthparents, birthfathers, and domestic birthmothers. (Contains 16 references.) (Author/GCP)

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The Life Cycle of Birthparents:

Future Directions for Counseling Psychologists

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The Life Cycle of Birthparents: Future Directions for Counseling Psychologists

Birthparents are the least studied, understood and served members of the adoption triad. Birthparents are also often the invisible members of the adoption triad. For some this is by preference, and for others this is an artifact of a system that has traditional required invisibility. This manuscript briefly reviews the limited and interdisciplinary literature on the lifelong experiences of birthparents. Much of the research attempts to predict relinquishment among pregnant adolescents considering adoption. Longer term – follow-up research is comprised mostly of retrospective studies of clinical populations. These findings, though not representative, indicate that birthparents feel a sense of loss up to thirty years following the relinquishment of their child. Counseling and research implications are discussed, including the importance of studying and providing services to international birthparents, birthfathers, and domestic birthmothers.

The Psychology of Adoption: Challenges and Opportunities for Birthparents

Mary O'Leary Wiley and Amanda L. Baden

Birthparents are the least studied, understood and served members of the adoption triad (Reitz & Watson, 1992). Based on the estimation that up to five million Americans are adopted, it can be inferred that up to ten million people are birthparents of Americans, birthparents both from the United States and from other countries. Birthparents are often the invisible members of the adoption triad. For some, this is by preference, and for others, this is an artifact of a system that has traditionally required invisibility. Historically, services provided for birthparents have been offered with a primary focus on the relinquishment of their child and post-adoption services generally have been limited.

The field of Counseling Psychology(Gelso & Fretz, 2001; Whiteley, 1999), with its focus on understanding people within their life context (person-environment interaction models), on helping people experiencing predictable life crises, and on viewing development from a multicultural perspective, is a field that has much to offer in the understanding of birthparents. Most of all, a counseling psychology paradigm allows us to recognize a lifespan model for birthparents: that the impact of being a birthparent, lasts throughout the lifespan (e.g., Haugaard, Schustack, & Dorman, 1998).

The theoretical and empirical literature regarding birthparents has been developed in a variety of professional and academic disciplines and in a number of countries (such as Canada and Australia). Disciplines contributing to this literature have included psychology through the seminal work of Ann and David Brodzinsky and the impressive work of Grotevant and his colleagues in studying adoptees and to a lesser extent birthparents (Brodzinsky, 1990; Brodzinsky, & Schechter, 1990), as well as the fields of

psychiatry (Condon, 1986; Rynearson, 1982), social work (DeSimone, 1996), and child welfare (Blanton & Deschner, 1990; Chippindale-Bakker & Foster, 1996). Integration of this interdisciplinary literature on birthparents has been very limited in part because of the paradigmatic differences in research and practice among disciplines.

For example, social work literature has tended to focus on factors that lead a pregnant woman to relinquish, the psychiatric literature has tended to focus on impairment seen in birthmothers years after the relinquishment, and clinical psychology literature has explored the effects of openness on all members of the triad, including the birthparents. There is very little, if any, literature using a preventive framework, little if any literature on psychoeducational program outcomes, and too few studies that look at longitudinal outcomes for birthparents.

Politically, birthparents during the latter part of the 20th century have spoken out in an attempt to move themselves from a sinful and shamed position in society to birthparents as empowered partners in the making of an adoption plan for their child (Cole & Donley, 1990). Enlightened adoption agencies have followed suit and have begun to expand the voice of the birthparent in making an adoption plan. Private adoptions through legal intermediaries are often undertaken with the birthparent (usually birthmother) being the sole decision maker regarding choice of placement. And though birthparent clients report that having a voice at placement empowers them in many ways, it does not prevent the predictable lifespan issues that occur for birthparents. Therefore a lifespan paradigm from Counseling Psychology is a needed perspective for this population.

There is a solid body of research and clinical literature that discusses the grief experienced by birthmothers upon relinquishment (DeSimone, 1996), Winkler and van Keppel (1984) described the social isolation, family rejection, changes in residence and employment, and severe stress experienced by birthmothers. Birthmothers experience a wide variety of conflicting emotions such as denial, confusion, fear, shame, anticipation, pride, and sadness. Sorosky et al. (1978) noted that 82% of the birthparents they surveyed ten to 33 years after the closed adoption placement of their child wondered about the child's appearance, personality, and attributes, and about the type of care the child was receiving from the adoptive family. DeSimone (1996) surveyed 450 birthmothers and found that thirty four percent never had other children.

Some studies have found positive outcomes for relinquishing birthmothers at follow-up. Namerow, et. al., (1997) surveyed teenage mothers four years after giving birth and found that those who decided to place their child for adoption had more favorable outcomes on sociodemographic outcomes such as level of education, income, and health. (My personal belief is that relinquishing is often the best choice for these birthmothers and that it most likely does lead to positive sociodemographic outcome while at the same time leading to emotional stresses and, for many, perhaps even resiliency. However to date, no research has studied these variables in a sample simultaneously.)

Birthfathers are an even more invisible group to study in relation to long-term effects. Ciccini (1993) did a study of 30 Australian birthfathers and found that only 17% of the men reported feeling positive about the relinquishment, with most remembering it as a distressing experience.

Counseling can be sought by birthparents and birthfamily members at any point in their lives. This treatment may be prior to the relinquishment to request help in decision-making and grief. Counseling may be during the relinquishment process to request help in dealing with the pain of loss or reconfirming the decision. It may also be at any point in the future, and may or may not be directly related to the relinquishment. However, the relinquishment is always part of the birthparents' histories, and as such, is relevant to nearly any concern throughout their lives.

Clinical interventions can include writing a letter for their child and deciding whether to give it to the adoptive parents, writing a letter to the adoptive parents, and participating in a support group for prospective birthmothers through a reputable agency or support network. Research has demonstrated that the provision of counseling following a relinquishment of a child for adoption assists birthparents in their adjustment. Individual counseling, group programs and psychoeducational programs can be designed and offered to birthparents who are experiencing difficulty (Rynearson, 1982), as well as at times in a birthparent's life when the relinquishment is likely to be prominent.

Times that birthmothers report to be especially significant for them include the child's birthday (especially significant birthdays), his/her assumed first day of school, events such as assumed First Communion or Bar/Bat Mitzvah; Confirmation; graduation dates, etc. Holidays and Mother's Day can be reminders of loss and grief. They also identified subsequent children, grandchildren and their milestones as serving as a reminder of the relinquished child. These can also serve as triggers for birthparents and birthfamily members to seek counseling services.

We as counseling psychologists must be aware of the invisible birthparents within our midst. Intake forms should be designed with birthparent responses in mind (e.g., asking clients to complete a form that requests number of children prior to meeting their therapist can be difficult). Sensitivity to possible birthparents in the audience when counseling psychologists speak to groups on parenting issues must occur.

Further research is needed that broadens the samples, instruments, and methodologies used in birthparent research. For example, samples should be drawn from the broadest pool possible. Much of the current research has been completed using clinical samples or samples recruited from adoption reform organizations. These sampling techniques may have led to a pathological bias in the findings that are important to remedy in future research. Instrumentation has most often included self-report surveys. Follow-up research using the sample surveys or validated assessment instruments would improve the quality of the literature (See Lee, this symposium). Instruments to measure issues related to birthparents need to be developed, and those instruments already developed (e.g., DeSimone, 1994) need to be used across samples.

Though research has developed dramatically over the past decade, it has relied nearly exclusively on written surveys and personal interviews. Future research needs to include more sophisticated qualitative and single subject designs, statistical analyses beyond percentage reporting, and more longitudinal and programmatic research with birthmothers, birthfathers and other birthfamily members. Researchers and should use both sociological and psychological outcome measures such as educational attainment, income level, number of future children, future marriages, as well as measures of depression, grief and other clinical symptoms.

Most importantly, research on the experiences of birthmothers and birthfathers that are relinquishing internationally needs to be undertaken. Reasons for relinquishment by international birthparents need to be assessed, including poverty, civil unrest, financial incentives and urban migration. The lifelong effects and outcomes need to be assessed for international birthparents with no less consideration than for domestic birthparents. Further research will result in the formulation of professional intervention strategies suited to effective counseling for birthparents. Future research needs to include a move toward incorporating theory into research on birthparents, particularly within a developmental, lifespan framework focusing of resiliency. Finally, all future research must incorporate multicultural sensitivity into the treatment of subjects, design of research itself, and research questions.

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